

The Fig Tree

This past Sunday morning was Palm Sunday, when Christians around the world once again celebrate Jesus' Triumphal Entry in Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passion Week. Sometime on Monday, a second significant event took place – Jesus cleansed the Temple of the money changers and those who would profane the house of God.

Yet on that same Monday morning and the following morning, there was another event of paramount importance, witnessed only by the disciples, which seems to slip through the cracks of our memory of all the events that took place that week – the story of the barren fig tree.

For years I have wondered about the story of the fig tree as told in Matthew 21:18-22 and Mark 11:13-14, 20-25. Here was Jesus – kind and loving and full of grace, the Creator of all things. Why would He curse a fig tree? Of all people, He certainly would know that trees are inanimate organisms which do not make decisions and therefore have no moral capacity.

I know I must have heard others teach on this topic through the past 64 years of my life, but apparently I was not listening, or maybe the Holy Spirit simply waited until He knew that I could understand the lesson to give me comprehension.

Whatever the case, I pray you are inspired by this singular event which is often lost amidst the other spectacular events of the Passion Week.

Part 1

After most of the excitement had died down following His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus and His disciples wound their way to the Temple, working their way through the celebratory crowd that had assembled in the city to celebrate the Festival of Passover.

Once arrived, Jesus toured the Temple and the area around it and, finding all was well, and because the hour was late, He and His disciples set out on their nearly two-mile walk, retracing their steps of the morning toward the village of Bethany where they would spend each night of the Passover Week.

They most likely followed the path from the Temple Mount leading through the Golden Gate, through which Jesus had entered riding on a donkey during the Triumphal Entry earlier in the day. After crossing the Kidron Valley, they passed through the Garden of Gethsemane and followed the winding path that led up the steep western slope of the Mount of Olives, passing through the thick groves that topped the hill.

Having reached the ridge, they passed through the small hamlet of Bethphage, whose name meant "house of unripened figs." This was the same village from which the disciples had

gathered the colt upon which Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem earlier that morning. Branching off the road that would carry a traveler to Jericho and turning south, the path began its shallow descent as the company came near to Bethany on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives.

The Bible does not tell us what time they made the return journey to Jerusalem the next morning. Maybe they left early enough to miss breakfast, or maybe they left long enough after breakfast that the walk toward Jerusalem stirred their appetites. We might assume they left Bethany somewhat later in the morning to begin the 45 minute walk back to the city, for even as they traveled, the transformation in the environment of the Temple which would spawn such an outburst of righteous indignation is Jesus was already in full swing.

Whatever the case may be, somewhere along the route from Bethany to Jerusalem, Jesus experienced hunger pangs. Then up ahead beside the road in the distance, he saw a fig tree that was completely covered with leaves. To the eye of the hungry traveler, there was the promise of relief. A tree that was so covered with leaves certainly held the promise of fruit. From a distance, the fig tree looked like any other fig tree might look except for one thing – Mark tells us in verse 13 that “it was not the season for figs.”

Commentators¹ do not fully agree on the exact meaning of this phrase, but most seem to agree that this tree should not have been so fully covered in leaves during the week of Passover. The consensus seems to be that the tree was fully leafed out as only a fruit-producing tree would have been, even though this was not the season for fig production. This particular tree seemed to be an anomaly and thus stood out from the other trees around it, making it visible for a good distance.

Here was a tree that, at face value (from a distance) looked like a fig tree and held the promise of figs, but when inspected closely, revealed that it bore no fruit. In spite of its appearance (profession), the tree could produce no evidence (practice or performance) that it was, in fact, a fig tree.

One might wonder right here about why the fig tree is seen in the story in an anthropomorphic light. In other words, the story seems to teach that Jesus held the fig tree morally responsible for not producing figs. Yet to do so seems futile since trees do not make decisions about anything, let alone about whether or not they produce fruit. To understand the nature of fruit trees is to understand that fruit is not the work of the tree. Fruit is the work of nature – that which is produced through the agency of the tree.

Furthermore, fruit is not defined by the type of tree on which it grows. A tree is defined by the type of fruit that it produces. A tree is only a fig tree if it bears figs. A fig tree that is truly a fig tree will produce figs. A tree that looks like a fig tree but does not produce figs is not, in reality, a fig tree.

As Creator of the world, certainly Jesus knew all these things, and, as God in the flesh, He was certainly aware, even from a distance, that the tree bore no fruit. We must conclude that Jesus did not curse the tree because the tree bore any moral responsibility for the situation. His actions in inspecting and ultimately cursing the tree were not motivated by anger or malice or retribution, but by revelation and judgment.

Concerning revelation, this was a teachable moment and the time for such moments was rapidly drawing to a close. Jesus took advantage of the barren fig tree as a living parable – an object lesson for the disciples immediately, on a broader scale for the nation of Israel, and ultimately for the church today. In fact, there are close parallels between this living parable and the actual parable Jesus told in Luke 13:6-9. Jesus saw a tree, inspected it for fruit, found none, and caused its destruction.

Mark 11:14 says that, after inspecting the tree and finding no fruit, that Jesus “answered” (KJV). The word here means “to speak in response to something that had previously been said.” It was almost as if Jesus were responding to a statement – a profession – made by the fig tree. His curse of the tree was his answer.

Mark goes on to say in this same verse that “the disciples heard” what was said. The word “heard” can mean “to give ear to a teaching or a teacher, to comprehend, to understand.” So the disciples understood that Jesus was not simply cursing a fruitless tree but also saw this as a teaching moment – a moment of revelation.

Concerning judgment, Jesus cursed the tree, because giving the outward appearance of being a fig tree without producing figs proved that the tree was worthy of condemnation. The tree professed to be a fig tree by its profusion of leaves, but since there was no fruit to prove it, then it was not a fig tree, and its profession was a lie. Its lack of figs was, of a sort, a type of fruit that proved it worthy of judgment.

Jesus destroyed the tree to prevent others who were hungry and looking for relief from being deceived, and to demonstrate to the disciples that, in the judgment of God, destruction is better than deception.

For the Christian, fruit is not something that he can will himself to produce any more than the fig tree could will itself to produce figs. Just as the fruit of a tree is the work of nature through the agency of the tree, so is the fruit of a Christian the work of the Holy Spirit acting in and through the person.

The tree made a loud profession that allowed it to be seen from a distance, but that did not make it a fig tree. A person may make a firm and a loud profession of the fact that he is saved, but his profession will not prove that he is a Christian. Only fruit will do that. At face value – or

from a distance – the one making a profession of faith may appear to be a Christian; however, close inspection will either confirm or deny the truth of the profession.

Maybe that is why, in the Great Commission, Jesus did not insist that His disciples go out and convince men to make professions of faith, but to make disciples – not just to see others from a distance, but to build close relationships that will allow the confirmation of one's profession of faith.

Just as a fig tree that is truly a fig tree will bear figs, a Christian will bear fruit. The proof of whether or not a tree is a fig tree is an arbor full of leaves that is also accompanied by figs. The proof of whether or not a person is a Christian is a profession of faith that is also accompanied by fruit.

Notes

¹ Every commentator has an opinion about this phrase and none seem to agree completely. Here is a sampling of some of the commentaries:

Commonly at the beginning of April the trees that still grow out of the rocks between Bethany and Jerusalem are bare both of leaves and fruit, and so probably it was now with all but the single tree which attracted our Lord's notice. It was in full foliage, and being so far in advance of its fellows it might not unnaturally have been expected to have had, in the first week of April, the first ripe fruit which usually was gathered in May. Ellicott, Charles John. "Commentary on Mark 11:13". "Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers". "<http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/ebc/view.cgi?bk=mr&ch=11>". 1905.

Passover-time was "not" the time of figs on Mount Olivet. Morison, James. *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark. Ed 3.* Hodder and Stoughton:Oxford University, 118, p. 328. PDF version, digitized 22Aug2006. Downloaded from google.com.

Though it was too early for fruit, it was also too early for leaves. The tree evidently had an unusually favorable position. It seemed to vaunt itself by being in advance of the other trees, and to challenge the wayfarer to come and refresh himself.

J. W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton. "Commentary on Mark 11:13". "The Fourfold Gospel". "<http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/tfg/view.cgi?bk=mr&ch=11>". Standard Publishing Company, Cincinnati, Ohio. 1914.

The early figs in Palestine do not get ripe before May or June, the later crop in August. It was not the season of figs, Mark notes. But this precocious tree in a sheltered spot had put out leaves as a sign of fruit. It had promise without performance. Robertson, A.T. "Commentary on Mark 11:13". "Robertson's Word Pictures of the New Testament". "<http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/rwp/view.cgi?bk=mr&ch=11>". Broadman Press 1932,33. Renewal 1960.